

Self-portrait in the Middle Ages

Ioana Palamar*

Abstract: *Self-portrait has always been a complex artistic genre since its appearance until gaining its autonomy, because it reflects the artist's mental and artistic development level to a great extent. If in Ancient times, self-portrait was considered just a simple documentary evidence, later it became a real symbol of the painter's identity and also an essential way of expressing one's deepest feelings which seemed to be forgotten, but they were actually stored in one's subconscious level. The article highlights specific ways of self-representations both in universal and in Romanian medieval art, which mark the beginning of self-consciousness, from a psychological point of view, and the beginning of a three dimensional representation, from a technical point of view, which indicates the beginning of profane painting that is different from the Byzantine style characterized by specific representation canons.*

Keywords: Middle Ages, self-portrait, facial expressions, Byzantine painting, profane painting

Introduction

Generally speaking, self-portrait emerged due to a strong psychological need to express some hidden experiences which are apparently forgotten, but stored in our subconscious. The purpose consists in presenting the development of self-portraits both in the history of universal and Romanian art which are analyzed from a historical point of view by making some connections with the Middle Ages Period, but also from a psychological point of view according to the structure: Id – Ego – Superego which involves the decipherment of certain symbols expressed by instincts that are denied by our consciousness, concealed in the unconsciousness and subsequently outsourced indirectly¹. Self-portrait stands for a symptomatic manifestation of our unconsciousness² and brings to light the desires, regrets

* Teaching Assistant, PhD. George Enescu National University of Arts

¹ Constantin Enăchescu, *Tratat de psihanaliză și psihoterapie [Treaties on Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy]*, Maria-Elena Druță (editor), "Didactică și Pedagogică" Publishing House, R.A. - Bucharest, 1998, pp. 34-35.

² Cristian Nae, *Moduri de a percepe. O introducere în teoria artei moderne și contemporane [Ways of Perceiving. An Introduction to the Theory of Modern and Contemporary Art]*, Oana Maria Nae (red.), Arte Publishing House, Iași, 2013, p.86.

or traumas repressed by our consciousness, whose interpretations are difficult to convey:

Thus, dream and artistic creation as well, are «enigmas which need to be deciphered», because both in dream and in art, there is a latent content which is expressed in a derivative way through the artistic forms the artist resorts to and because, in both situations, the intervention of consciousness limits free expression.³

Self-portrait has a complex history, judging its evolution as an artistic genre from its emergence to its autonomy, both in universal and Romanian art history, reflecting the artist's status as well as his mental and artistic evolution. If the painter initially considered self-portrait a simple documentary-artistic attestation, then this artistic genre became a real identity symbol and an indispensable way of expressing the most hidden experiences, apparently forgotten, but stored in the subconscious. The trajectory is complex, so that self - portrait evolved from a contextual self-projection⁴, a role-playing game⁵, an independent genre⁶, a creation as a show⁷, to self-portrait in a mirror⁸, as a performative object⁹ or as a hidden¹⁰ or abstract one.¹¹ The process of self-knowledge requires solitude and the artist Leonardo da Vinci considered that the others disturb the tranquility of the soul which is essential for a better knowledge of one's inner world: "If you are alone, you belong entirely to yourself. If you are accompanied by even one companion, you belong only half to yourself or even less in proportion to the thoughtlessness of his conduct and if you have more than one companion,

³ *Ibidem*, p.87, apud Sarah Kofmann, *L'enfance de l'art. Une interprétation de l'esthétique freudienne [The Childhood of Art. An Interpretation of Freudian Aesthetics]*, Payot Publishing House, Paris, 1970.

⁴ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Instaurarea tabloului. Metapictura în zorii Timpurilor Moderne [The Instauraton of Painting. Metapainting at the dawn of Modern Times]*, translation from French made by Andrei Niculescu, "Meridiane" Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, pp. 232-242.

⁵ *Masquerade: Role Playing in Self-Portraiture - Photographs from the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection, Art of the Americas Building, October 12, 2006–January 7, 2007*

<<http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/masquerade-role-playing-self-portraiture%E2%80%94photographs-audrey-and-sydney-irmas>> (29.05.2016, 12:48).

⁶ I. C. editor artline.ro, *Autoportretul, o incursiune în timp și spațiu [Self-portrait, a]*, published on 22.08.2013, 17:08

<<http://www.artline.ro/Autoportretul--o-incursiune-in-timp-si-spatiu-32158-1-n.html>> 22.08.2013 (29.05.2016, 12:55).

⁷ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *op.cit.*, pp. 262-284.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 250-262.

⁹ Alex Greenberger, *The Art of Disguise? How Self-Portraiture Went Undercover*, 25.11.2013 <http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/art_market/self_portraiture-51776>, (29.05.2013, 13:06).

¹⁰ *Geta Brătescu. Atelierul*, Alina Șerban (ed.), traduceri: Vlad Arghir, Alistair Ian Blyth, Laura Ionică, Claudia Rada, traducere din poloneză Krzysztof Kosciuczuk, Ed. Sternberg Press, Kontakt, Berlin, Asociația pepluspatru, București, 2013, p. 79.

¹¹ *Abstract portraiture*, <<https://ro.pinterest.com/jennaclisha/abstract-portraiture/>> (29.05.2016, 15:03).

you will fall more deeply into the same plight.”¹² Johann Wolfgang Goethe considers that ”Self-knowledge comes from knowing other people”¹³, thus bringing the self-knowledge process to a balanced level. The reason behind self-portrayal is the desire of individualization and self-valorization of which one is more or less conscious of, having its roots in childhood since the moment the human being starts showing interest in one’s own physiognomy.¹⁴ Self-awareness since the age of 18 months¹⁵, as well the awareness of one’s own feelings and thoughts¹⁶ since the age of 4 or 5 years old reveal an intense need for self-knowledge which develops later in life. It is not accidental the usage of mirror in the artistic creations of the 20th century, in this respect, it is relevant Michelangelo Pistoletto’s self-portrait which is part of the series entitled *Mirror Paintings* which consists in integrating the natural-size of his own image on the surface of a mirror. The main aim is to include external characters as well as other elements from the environment in his artworks, in order to deal with the hazard. According to Lacan’s concept, the ego projection in a mirror is illusory, being rather understood as a self-denial or as an utopia of self-knowledge¹⁷ and Pistoletto has created a connection with this idea which is about creating a fictional (self-)portrait. It is considered that self-knowledge is partly fulfilled and a human being is defined by an endless mountain of secrets which cannot be fully decrypted. From a psychological point of view, the imperative need for self-portraiture is explained by the desire to unconsciously compensate the lack produced by the loss of the original state¹⁸ when the baby suffers a separation from his mother’s body at birth. This nostalgia for unity, symbolized by the artistic creation (self-portrait), can also be connected to Id-Ego relationship which forms a unitary whole¹⁹ in the prenatal stage, as these

¹² Leonardo da Vinci > *Quotes* > *Quotable Quote*, <<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/131743-if-you-are-alone-you-belong-entirely-to-yourself-if>> (20.08.2016, 12:53).

¹³ *Self-Knowledge Quotes*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/self-knowledge.html>> (20.08.2016, 12:57).

¹⁴ Matthias Wildermuth, *Entwicklungs- und Störungsmodelle B1 Module, Spezielle Störungslehre: Krankheiten des Kindesalters, Behinderung, B2 Module, VorahmungMitahmung-Nachahmung-Verbindung, Leibnahe und geistnahe seelische Spiegelungsprozesse in der Entwicklung*, Power Point Presentation, slide no. 16, Master Studies, Art Therapy, Alanus Hochschule für Kunst und Gesellschaft University, Alfter, Bonn, 2015.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, slide no. 26.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁷ Cristian Nae, *op.cit.*, pp.102-120.

¹⁸ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Psihanaliza artei și a creativității*, Marius Chivu, Silviu Dragomir, Vasile Dem Zamfirescu (editors), translation from French to Romanian by Georgeta Mitrea, Trei Publishing House, București, 2002, pp. 86-90.

¹⁹ K.-U. Adam, *I Allgemeine theoretische Grundlagen*, Springer Publishing House, Berlin, 2006, <http://www.krammerbuch.at/bookData/pdfs/adam_lesepr.pdf>(29.05.2016,17:34).

two instances are not developed yet. The beginning of awareness marks the beginning of a development which leads to a painful experience that is felt like a real shock; once the prenatal stage is over, the baby breaks out of his mother's body (Id) in order to enter the physical world and since that very moment his native stage begins (Ego) and Superego becomes a component part of it which is willingly "built" by the educational and social factors. These three instances are connected to each other during the entire life as a whole in comparison to the prenatal stage when this connection is not fully defined, there is no clear separation among these three instances.

Remarkable is the fact that in the Middle Ages, the painter began to ask himself existential questions that materialized during Renaissance in the acute desire to faithfully represent the reality from an anatomic point of view, self-portrait having a fluctuating and complex development that gradually focused on: metamorphoses (El Greco, Francisco de Goya), anamorphosis (Pietro da Cortona), brutal reality (Gustave Courbet) and, last but not least, on atmospheric effects, in which human being becomes just a pretext (Claude Monet), or on effects of deconstructed forms (Paul Cézanne). The interest consisted in identifying the real reasons behind painters' inner need to use their own faces as a pretext for expressing personal affections, filtered, of course, from the point of view of artistic styles conditioned by the atmosphere of that epoch in which the artist lived, and consisted also in outstanding specific biographical experiences that are connected to their painted self-portraits.

Portrait in the art of Middle Ages: Romanic, Gothic Periods

The medieval age (II-XIV centuries) was a difficult period caused by the invasions of Germanic tribes (Goths, Vandals, Saxons and Vikings) and wars, being characterized by a moral and spiritual crisis²⁰ which was also reflected in portraiture. This was also due to simple people's unjustified and naive fear towards the magical art of portrait which constituted a real impediment to finding patterns, as there was a strong and interesting belief that once the character was transposed on a canvas, a part of the character's soul was lost:

Who doesn't know that most of people used to believe until a while ago, that «painting» a character was equivalent to «stealing his soul», and

12 Constantin Enăchescu, *Tratat de psihopatologie*, Tehnică Publishing House, București, 2000, p. 17.

²⁰ D. N. Zaharia, *Istoria artei antice și medievale*, 2nd Edition, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2008., p. 141.

*that the person who would let his face to be painted was about to die in 40 days*²¹,

but gradually people became more open-minded and stopped having this conviction.

Self-portrait had an interesting evolution, as the medieval artists became more aware of their own artistic abilities; monk Eadwine from Canterbury painted his self-portrait from his memory, being the first self-portrait attempt in the history of universal art²². This illustrates the author's contextualization within the initials of his name, represented by a small workshop, in which the artist surprises himself during the painting process with the utensils in his both hands. This self-representation is a Romanic one²³, since one can notice the superficial rendering of shadows, the precarious perspective and the clumsy drawing, as well as the stylized and naive representation, but remarkable is the attempt of representing a *more expressive and humanised character*²⁴ which compensates all these technical deficits, highlighting the separation from the Byzantine style canons. On a closer inspection as for the character's facial expression, one can notice the artist's concentration during his work expressed by his gaze towards the letter R which is being painted; the artist keeps the paintbrush in his right hand with much skill and trust in his own forces, and in the other hand a supporting tool (german *Malstock, Malerstock*) and a color container. In fact, the painter creates his own inner space, a personal universe that offers protection, safety and self-confidence.

During the Gothic period (12th-15th centuries), self(-portrait) as a genre experienced an innovative interpretation, being perceived not only from a spiritual perspective but also from a physical one, and in this context the theologian Thomas d'Aquino distinguished with lucidity and intelligence the spiritual beauty from the profane one, challenging a new aesthetics: *One thing is considered to be beautiful when it has a bodily or spiritual sparkle of its own kind.*²⁵ Also, the Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri, who had a nice friendship relationship with d'Aquino, had the same opinion (*And when the body is well-formed and prone, then each part is beautiful, as well as the entire body...*²⁶), thus pleading for a more obvious detachment from the Byzantine tradition.

²¹ Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Mișcarea artistică oficială în România secolului al XIX-lea*, București, Noi Media Print Publishing House, București, 2008, p.9, apud Gheorghe Popovici, *Expozițiunea de pictură de la Ateneu*, „Lupta”, No. 1970/4 April, 1893.

²² *500 Self-Portraits*, Phaidon Press Limited Publishing House, Londra, 2000, p. 14.

²³ Romanic style appeared in 10th-12th centuries.

²⁴ D. N. Zaharia, *op.cit.*, p.229.

²⁵ Valentin Sava, *Judecata estetică și portretul în pictura de șevalet*, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2005, p.49, apud *Despre Numele Divine* (translation by M. Gramatopol).

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p.50, apud Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedie*.



Fig. 5 Rufilus brother, *Inițiala R*, miniature from a Legendar, 13th century, Bodmeriana Library, Geneva²⁷

Giotto di Bondone, an artist on the border between medieval and Renaissance period, demonstrated an authentic ability to represent emotions, by humanizing character's traits, which implied the introduction of character's study, thus giving the viewer the opportunity to decipher intense experiences of joy or dramatic states of mind:

Even if the memory of the Byzantine "Greek manner" was very strong, Giotto «rethink»s it, by «making some changes» and by checking the character's representative value when it comes to reality confrontation²⁸.

One can confirm that since this era, signs of self-awareness have become more prominent and self-portrait gained its recognition during Renaissance period. Painters unconsciously felt the need for identity affirmation and recognition and the self-portraiture attempt began to satisfy all these requirements, becoming later an indispensable tool in an artist's creation.

²⁷ Simon Abrahams, *Brother Rufillus' Self-Portrait (c. 1170-1200)*

<https://www.academia.edu/9129386/Brother_Rufillus_Self-Portrait_c._1170-1200 >

(02.08.2016, 00:15), *500 Self Portraits*, Phaidon Press Limited, Londra, Anglia, 2000, p.14, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Instaurarea tabloului. Metapictura în zorii Timpurilor Moderne*, translation from French by Andrei Niculescu, Meridiane Publishing House, București, 1999, p. 233.

²⁸ Ovidiu Drimba, *Istoria culturii și civilizației*, 7th volume, Saeculum I.O. Publishing House, București, 2007, p. 308.

Portraiture representations in the art of the Romanian Countries since ancient times until Modern Age: Antiquity, the Middle Ages

Generally speaking, ancient people used to paint animals, avoiding the representation of human silhouettes, since they believed that human soul *drips* out of the human body once a character is being painted.

The first self-portrait in the history of Romanian art was recorded in the 14th century and belongs to painter Grozie²⁹; it's considered to be the first attempt to reproduce the three-dimensionality of the human body through the interference of the shaded parts with the bright ones, under the influence of the Gothic style:

Unlike Orthodox churches which promoted Byzantine canons and established a precise iconographic order, Gothic paintings are very free from this point of view and it's difficult to establish certain distribution rules.³⁰

The appearance of this first self-portrayal intention represents a real sign of self-awareness of one's own artistic value and affirmation of ego. Grozie is represented next to Saint Nicholas³¹ to whom is praying and appears in the light of a pronounced spirituality, betrayed by his eyes raised to heaven, as well as by his praying hands. His meditative and pious face symbolizes his detachment from the profane world in order to re-establish his connection with Divinity, but also represents the egotic desire for self-recognition of artistic value.

In the 15th century, a less rigid compositional style was asserted, a major role in this direction being played by monk Gavril Uric³² from *Neamț* monastery which was a real source of inspiration for future Moldavian generations of miniature and easel paintings. He succeeded in expressing the characters' inner feelings, the relaxed line and the decorative borders encouraging the emergence of profane tendencies in Romanian (self-) portraiture.

²⁹ Vasile Florea, *Istoria artei românești veche și medievală*, in 3 volumes: 1st volume, Hyperion Publishing House, Chișinău, 1991, p. 100.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p.101, apud Vasile Drăguț, *Arta românească*, București, 1982, p. 126

³¹ Vladimir Agrigoroaiei, *Picturile de la Strei. Sau cum a sorbit Grozie din apa vieții* <<http://totb.ro/picturile-de-la-strei-sau-cum-a-sorbit-grozie-din-apa-vietii/>> (04.08.2016,00:05)

³² Vasile Drăguț, Vasile Florea, Dan Grigorescu, Marin Mihalache, *Pictura românească în imagini*, Meridiane Publishing House, București, 1970, p. 25.

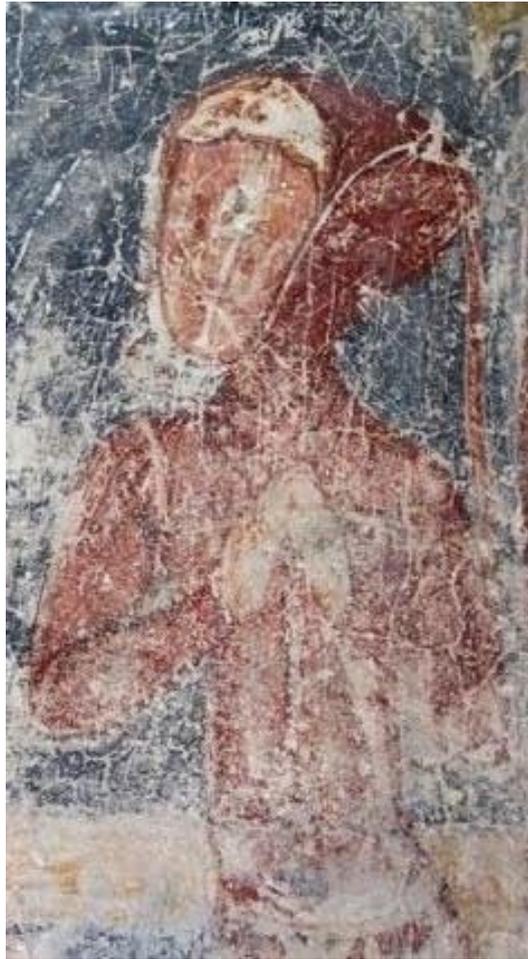


Fig. 2 Grozie Painter, *Self-portrait of Grozie the master*, fresco, 16th century, *Strei* church, Hunedoara county³³

A remarkable portrait representation belongs to Metropolit Grigorie Roșca from *Voroneț* monastery, whose appearance next to Saint Daniil Sihastrul, Ștefan cel Mare's confessor, can be understood as a response to his pleading for the independence of our country³⁴ and for gaining a moral and artistic autonomy; it's a leitmotif that is present also in the scene of *Beleaguerment* from *Humor* monastery, where there is Toma's self-portrait from Suceava.³⁵ The obscure historical events during the 16th century

³³*Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 192, 376, fig. 348.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p.369.

encouraged the collaboration of Romanian artists with foreign artists, resulting in the individualization of human figure, as one can notice in the iconographic scenes from the orthodox cathedral *Curtea de Argeș*³⁶, which signals the beginning of profane painting. Important is to mention that in this period appeared the first artist's signature on the monastery frescoes, as it denotes a beginning of artist's self-awareness: *And I, the great David the painter, wrote [painted], together with my son Radislav*³⁷. The usage of the personal pronoun *I* highlights the authenticity of artist's status from that of the craftsman's a which was officially recognised only in the middle of the 19th century, whereas in the universal art this differentiation took place in the maturity period of Renaissance.

It can be concluded that the attempts of (self-) representation appeared since ancient times as an unconscious necessity of self-affirmation, in order to annihilate anonymity. The intention consisted in studying the emergence of first self-portraiture attempts, taking into consideration the psychological aspects which can help finding out specific explanations regarding this strong necessity of (self-) representation.

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³⁶ Vasile Drăguț, Vasile Florea, Dan Grigorescu, Marin Mihalache, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.

³⁷ Vasile Florea, *op. cit.*, p.320.

***, *That's me! Das Portrait von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart (Acesta sunt eu! Portretul din Antichitate până în prezent)*, Jaape Braakke (editor), Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover Publishing House, Hannover, 2010.

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